

# THE FAMILY BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GENDER AND FAMILY IN THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC PROPAGANDA OF THE DC AND THE PCI IN ITALY IN THE 1950S

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## Abstract

The profound social, economic and political changes that characterize the history of the twentieth century and that characterize the present, lead me to reflect on the representations that contemporary societies offer in the field of gender.

Starting from the representation of the universe of gender - of femininity and masculinity - and of the family sphere - a place of elaboration and comparison between secular cultures, left and right, but also common ground - we can retrace the history of the twentieth century through an analysis of the different languages of representation to go up to the present day where the study of the transformation of forms of representation and their spread.

My aim is to create a space of connections between gender, family and civil society; in this context the public and private dimensions can interact profitably, building a dialogue that can help to reach new scientific goals.

The intervention focuses on the use that the DC and the PCI have made of the cinematic representation of the family in political and cultural action towards Italian society. Through an analysis of the transformation of languages and representations, I will try to identify the most common themes, but also the types of families that the two sides have promoted and addressed. I also intend to reflect on narrative codes as an expression of the private and public role of the family. The objective of the family, as a subject/object of propaganda through the images of the two sides, will guide us along this path aimed at raising questions and revealing contradictions.

This is a series of social and political organizations, institutions and interpersonal relationships.

Through the analysis of different iconographic representations, the contribution aims to reflect in a contemporary way on the relationship between gender and society. Through a stratified reading of iconographic languages, I can see how gender representation is a stereotype used in the different contexts that cross Italy after the Second World War.

How does gender representation contribute to the formation of social identities? How are different iconographic products influenced by the political and religious spheres? Which stereotypes emerge? How are the different iconographic languages transformed?

How do different media respond to the policies of different religions and civil society?

How have political movements used gender models? How was the role and means of the family exploited and used by these actors?

I hope that the different methodological approach can contribute to enriching the ongoing debate.

**Key words:** family studies, media studies, gender studies, political parties studies, Italian studies.

### **The family of power**

From 1950 the DC through the Spes gives life to its own propaganda in images where the condemnation of communism is the predominant theme. During the fifties, short films such as *La lotta per la democrazia continua*, *Da Stalin a Kruscev* (1956), *L'ora della verità* (1956), *Qualcosa di nuovo per Bologna* (1956), used small local realities and events linked to the daily life of families, in particular rural and workers belonging to Central and Southern Italy, to discredit their political opponents and exalt good Christian Democrat government. An exemplary short film is *Accadde a Sopradisotto* (1950), shot on the occasion of the municipal elections of 1950; it tells the story of the imaginary village of Sopradisotto, a centre of Southern Italy administered by the PCI. From the very beginning, the incompetence of the communist administration to deal with public affairs is underlined through images of urban and social decay. Some narrative expedients, such as the repeated attempt by two peasants to register their daughter, are aimed at showing the lack of organization and the lack of interest of the party in the inhabitants of the country. Already from these sequences it is clear that the DC, rather than telling the private feelings of families, insists on their public dimension, on the relationship between the family and the institutions. What is said by contrast is the need for a fair relationship between the family, the State and the party in which every citizen, even if not a believer, could have recognized himself.

On the other hand, the devices of representation used by Spes for the construction of its film products are not limited to the areas described above. As Ventrone recalls, during the 1950s the identification of an internal enemy strengthened the identity of Catholics and consolidated the ties of the national community, called by the Church and the Christian Democratic Party to fight together against the foreign invader (A.Ventrone, 2005, pp. 3-17 and pp. 20 sgg.).

The consolidation of the Republic and the progressive return to normality imposed a transformation of the languages of mass communication; the Christian

Democrats were the first to understand the need to revise the communication codes of political propaganda. Since the early 1950s there has been a profound change in the narrative structure of the film and the themes proposed by the propaganda, but also in the techniques of filming and editing the film. The use of the American-style plane, of the trolley on rails, the progress in the use of fades and the cross editing of the different sequences are just some of the technical factors that contributed to the creation of more incisive products.

The progressive increase in the use of moving images made us feel the need to take more care of the film from a technical point of view. In these years the relationship between image and sound was also rethought, a variable that was underestimated in the first short films, but which in reality has a significant impact on the overall structure of the film: it marks its moments, its caesuras, its narrative climaxes and at the same time accompanies the viewer within the film's narrative, orchestrating his emotions and rapping him from the real world ( G. Rondolino, D. Tommasi, 1995, pp. 49- 136; P. Sorlin, 1977; P. Ortoleva, 1991, p.34-42).

If from the technical aspects the attention is focused on the transformation of the themes and languages of communication, it clearly emerges that alongside the electoral carousels, in which there is a tendency to persuade that the adversary is evil and not even citizenship should be recognized (*Gli acrobati della menzogna*, 1956; *Fantasie musicali*, 1956; quindi Cfr. *Belle ma false*, 1958; inoltre *Il compagno gnocco allocco*, 1958), a whole filmographic strand begins to take place that aims to describe how Italy, like other nations, now occupies a prominent place on the international scene (*Nasce una speranza*, 1952; *Qualcuno pensa a noi*, 1952; *Lunedì di Pasqua*, 1956; Cfr. *Qualche cosa di nuovo per Bologna*, 1956; *Il futuro è già cominciato*, 1958; *Perché la rinascita continui*, 1959).

The issues related to reconstruction, technological progress in agriculture and industry, the economic growth of the country and the consolidation of welfare are the strength of the propaganda images of Spes since the early fifties. The field of conflict therefore widens and the propaganda needs new languages that effectively represent the change of the country, restoring the results of good Christian Democrat government. The productions of Spes tells the story of a country that has returned to life after the misfortunes of the war and the family is at the center of the narratives. There are significant short films *Che accade laggiù?* (1952) *Carrellate sul viterbese* (1955).

The films, showing the enthusiasm of families who received the house from the State or who finally had running water and electricity, showed how the DC had kept its promises. Many of the criticisms levelled at the government's work therefore appeared to be the result of "a smear campaign launched by the communists", who wanted to "divide the citizens, break up the families and destroy our country" (G. Cesaretti, 1951).

In this context, the short film on the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno*, *Che accadde laggiù?* which aimed to show how the DC tried to make geographically and culturally distant regions and different social classes dialogue, seems to be very effective. The story revolves around the character of the "Mr. De Rossi" employed in the public and his family; De Rossi, a small bourgeois with the fear of being defrauded of his privileges, is initially sceptical about the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, and shows a certain animosity towards the farmers of southern Italy, which he defines as "lazy

*earthlings*". The filmmaker, through the narrative expedient of his dream - in this case a nightmare given that De Rossi imagines himself to be a southern laborer - introduces the theme of solidarity; and at the same time he entrusts the moral of the story to the protagonist:

*"the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, by helping those poor farmers of the South, will also help us, the living conditions will improve [...] the Cassa will bring well-being to everyone"* (*Che accadde Laggiù*, 1952).

The constant reference to the theme of solidarity and to a Catholic community diversified within it socially, culturally and geographically, indicates how the party intended to address the entire community and communicate with all classes, the emphasis on class differences was not intended to denounce, but rather to support and nurture a spirit of solidarity. It remains to be seen whether the policies implemented and propagated by the DC really contributed to a process of strengthening the feeling of national cohesion.

On the other hand, the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* is the topic that is most discussed in the early fifties. If newspapers such as *"L'Europeo"* describe the numerous background events that accompanied the agrarian reform (*Dove va il denaro della Cassa del Mezzogiorno*, *L'Europeo*, 28 October, 1951; Cfr. S. De Feo, *L'Europeo*, 29 gennaio, 1952) and underline how the population of the South, rather than hoping for a 'modernization' of their territory, wishes to emigrate to areas where welfare and economic development have already established themselves (G. Cesaretti, *L'Europeo*», 28 October, 1951), the DC propaganda insists instead on promoting the work of reclamation undertaken by the State in Southern Italy.

Significant the short film *Nasce una speranza*, where the arrival of a child in a country village is an excuse to highlight the effort that the DC makes, through its government action, to create a situation of socio-economic stability in the countryside.

*Nasce una speranza* is set in the home of two young spouses from southern Italy, the house consists of two rooms: a large kitchen with fireplace and a small bedroom, the walls are unadorned and bear the signs of time.

While the woman is portrayed in bed exhausted by the pain of childbirth pains, her husband, unemployed, holds her hand at her bedside and worried about the future looks at the large crucifix that towers over the wedding bed. The narrator's voice interprets the thoughts of this disoriented young man:

*"What future can I offer my son? I don't have a job and maybe I'll never have one; misery reigns in the village and I don't have the strength to hope for a better tomorrow"* (*Nasce una speranza*, 1952).

The flames of the fireplace illuminate the face of the protagonist and that of a friend of the family who came to comfort him; the light of the fireplace was the only lighting of the house, the few and expensive candles were used only in an emergency. The two men, visibly cold, start talking; the future father, while observing the big holes in the soles of his shoes, confesses to his friend that he is afraid to give birth to *"a child"* because of the *"misery"* conditions in which he lives

(*Nasce una speranza*, 1952).



*Nasce una speranza*, Spes, (1952)

His friend, a well-dressed man in his thirties, promptly reassures him by telling him that he too once lived in the same conditions and had his fears, but since the land was assigned to him, he was serene and his economic condition had greatly improved. The cameraman closes with a close-up on the protagonist's face, his eyes have found hope again and his face is relaxed. The crying of the newborn bursts abruptly into the narrative; the father runs into the bedroom where his wife, who had meanwhile been joined by the midwife, gave birth to a child.

The narrator hastened to point out that the Christian Democrat government "*has done and is doing much for the South [...] everyone will have the land [...] a prosperous future*". While the narrator, in a decisive tone, pronounces the conclusive slogan, "*the DC for the Southern Italy chest*", the image of the family that at sunset climbs to the top of its hill from where you can admire the valley, closes the film.



*Nasce una speranza, Spes, (1952)*

The DC uses the nuclear family model, by definition more introverted and isolationist, to consolidate a system based on productivity and socio-economic growth of the country. In this case, the codes and customs of private family time are used as elements of connection to establish a dialogue between the public institution and the family (P. Ginsborg et al. 2010, p. 15-38 and pp.27-28). On the other hand, the propagandists place the emphasis on the affections and bonds of the couple ready to fight together to improve their living conditions. The sphere of feelings and complicity are central to the narrative; a representation of the private sphere often far from the reality of the Italian family of the 1950s, where the intimacy of the relationship of two is jealously guarded between the walls of the house.

### **The public use of the family between DC and PCI**

In view of the strong commitment of the DC in the cinematographic medium as an instrument of propaganda, on the other hand, there is a certain delay on the part of the PCI; in fact, the party preferred for some time to conduct its training and propaganda through the more traditional forms constituted by posters or rallies in the streets. This choice can also be attributed to economic reasons, but in particular it reflects the general lines of the leadership of the Section for Culture and Propaganda of the PCI, at the time directed by Edoardo D'Onofrio (A. Medici, M. Morbidelli, E. Taviani, 2001, pp. 154- 161; Cfr., P. Bracaglia and L. Gruppi, 1981, pp. 51- 52). However, after the attack on Palmiro Togliatti and already with the general elections of April 18, 1948, the Communist Party also began to experiment with the



means of film, with the main intent, which characterized its entire production, to denounce the social injustices that still characterized the Italian society after the Second World War. With rare exceptions, the preferred format was the short film, considered more agile than the feature film and certainly less expensive.

The narrative scheme used by the cinematic propaganda of the PCI differs significantly from that used by Spes. The film is constructed following the ways and the narrative style of a written text, the images are subordinate to the descriptions and the account of the narrators, there is also a disharmony between what is imprinted on the film' screen and the story of the voiceover.

In the short film *Viva l'unità* (1949), made a year after the attempt on Togliatti, while the images describe the activity carried out in many Italian cities by the '*amici dell'Unità*', the diachronically narrating voice introduces the next sequence in which a shout tries to sell the "*independent newspapers*", that is, those that "*can afford advertising because they are supported by the capitalist giants*" (*Viva L'Unità*, 1949). In the same way, in the documentary *Togliatti è ritornato* the narration in images and the spoken one have no connection: the second part of the short film takes Togliatti while he is giving a speech in parliament, but the narrator's voice, instead of describing the scene and giving information that would have allowed the viewer to contextualize the image, launches into an invective against the government and the DC.

Unlike the Christian Democrats, until 1962 the Communist Party did not have its own production company, the first short films and films were commissioned by the propaganda section of the PCI and by the Chambers of Labour, scattered throughout the peninsula, to small production companies such as CBC, Podus, Libertas film or Tecno Stampa. It was only at the end of the 1950s, with the arrival of Luciano Romagnoli, as Alessandro Curzi recalls, that "*a new, more modern course began, aimed at enhancing not only initiatives in the field of publishing, but also in the fields of cinema, radio and television*" (A. Medici, M. Morbidelli, E. Taviani, 2001, p.154).

From the new proposals and from the intersection of the activity of the propaganda section with that of culture, then directed by Rossana Rossanda, new forms of political communication flourished. The relationship between the party and the militants was rapidly changing and there was a need to change the forms of communication. As Gundele observed, a mass society based on a lifestyle centred on the multiplication of consumer goods was approaching, and this was no longer permeable to the languages used by the traditional modes of propaganda (S. Gundele, 1995, 226-234).

The diffusion of mass communication "*was in fact centralizing in itself many of the functions of the organization of hegemony once the prerogative of intellectuals*" (S. Gundele, 1995, 226-234). It was in these years that Unitelefilm was born, an organism that initially had the task of collecting the films produced by a series of central and peripheral structures of the party, and that during the sixties became an important reality in the field of production and distribution of political cinema. Without a doubt Unitelefilm was founded to counter the growing influence of television and its main activity was to produce films for the PCI, at important elections, and to keep citizens informed - especially militants - of the main battles carried out by the party (E. Taviani, 2001, pp. 135-153, pp. 136- 139)

Nevertheless, the analysis of the documents produced by the PCI reveals a family system and a society very different from those represented by the DC. Emblematic is the film produced at the end of the fifties *Il Prezzo del miracolo* (1963); The Price of the Miracle; using the theme of emigration (F. Ramella, 2002, pp. pp.339-386; cfr., G. Crocioni, 1978, pp.7 sgg.) as a pretext, the short film denounces the ineffectiveness of State policies and the link between the State and the values of the consumption society (P. Ginsborg, 1989, pp.309 sgg.), which can be related to the American way of life.

Relying on family rhetoric, the film takes stock of the first ten years of the Republic and underlines how much the social and economic geography of the country has changed. The first sequences of *Il prezzo del Miracolo* testify to the malaise of many citizens who had to leave their poor country of origin and their affections in search of work and fortune elsewhere. The voiceover, in a disillusioned tone, defines Milan as "*the city of miracles*" and the director, with a shot from below, depicts a small man who, with his gaze stretched upwards and his cardboard suitcase tightened in his hand, looks stunningly at a "*skyscraper*". The man portrayed at the foot of that giant, an image of capitalist society, seems swallowed up by his shadow.



*Il Prezzo del Miracolo, PCI, (1963)*

After all, that poor immigrant, if his luck had turned in his favour, would have ended up as a labourer at best. "*Happy years for whom!*", the narrator keeps repeating incessantly: "*for these workers who, after twelve hours of work, have to live in shacks, while the apartments they build cost too much rent money*".

The analysis of the languages, narrative techniques and filmic time of the story imposes some considerations (A. Gaudreault, F. Jost, 1990, p.103): the images commented on by the narrator seem to find definition at the very moment of their representation; a progressive account of events makes it possible that the



determined duration of the narration does not correspond to any duration of the story (G. Rondolino, D. Tommasi, 2007, p.34); moreover, the relationship of time, established between narration and history, has a further definition in the images. The *Prezzo del miracolo*, using the technique of the still-photogram, thus blocking itself on the face of the emigrant, allows the film to give news even when the narration is stopped (G. Rondolino, D. Tommasi, 2007, p.25). These pro-film elements determine a dilation of the narrative's time; they oblige the viewer to follow a predetermined path marked by temporal pauses that will affect the plot of the story.

But back to the contents; *Il prezzo del miracolo*, highlights that the welfare of this economic miracle has not been equally distributed among all citizens, therefore has exacerbated a social gap. While the narrator continues to ask himself: «*Happy years for whom*» the director takes up, with a close-up, the despondent faces of a group of men who, like a family, gather around a table to eat a plate of soup.



*Il Prezzo del Miracolo, PCI, (1963)*

With the background of a melancholic song that describes the long journey of the emigrants, the narrator argues that the wounds inflicted by a mismanagement of public affairs have contributed to family disintegration.

*“Even government newspapers are now forced to admit that if migration is not stopped in any way, the already sick South is doomed to ruin. The golden years belong to those who have a thousand billion, this is the sad reality. Their years are the years lost by these workers forced to Milan by the hope of improving their condition. Who will repay them for this time they spend in the North, or worse, in Germany, Belgium, France” (Il prezzo del miracolo, 1963).*

Although in an understated form, the family plays a leading role in the structure of the film; through the description of the figures of immigrants, its presence is

affirmed; the family institute is presented as a public subject, deprived of its autonomy (M. Casalini, 2010a, et 2011b). In the last sequences the order of events is reversed with respect to the order of history; the continuous use of mixed analysis (G. Rondolino, D. Tommasi, 1995, p.31) and some flash-words complete and fill those gaps in the narrative typical of propaganda short films. The surprise effect of these temporal variations and an accelerated montage of images, where the successive planes are shorter than each other, make the images take precedence over any narrative or semantic criteria. The viewer is involved to such an extent that he will not have time to personally rework the contents, and will have to rely on the interpretation of the narrator.

The pressing rhythm, also marked by the presence of environmental music, accompanies him, manipulates his gaze and his perception of the spatial-temporal dimensions. To help the audience to orient themselves within the story and to decipher the contents is the representation of recurring objects such as the cardboard suitcase, photographs, trains departing, a typical song sung by immigrants.

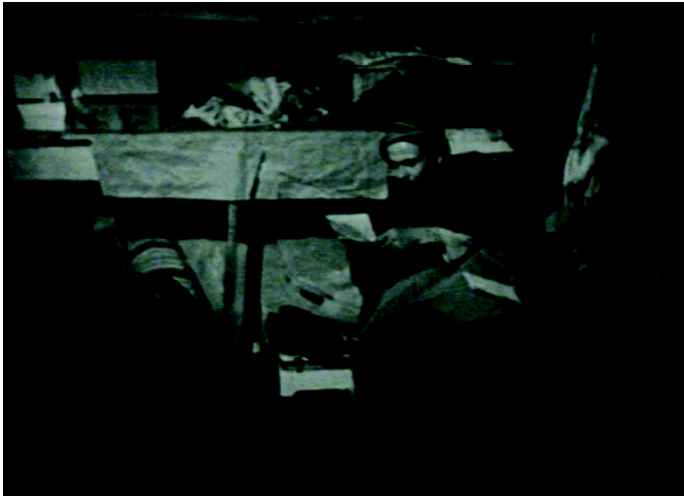
If you analyze the overall document, you notice that the closer you get to the conclusion the more the rhythm of the story relaxes. The variation of the filmic time introduces another aspect of the story where the figure of the immigrant, portrayed in his own intimacy, announces a representation of the private of the family. After dinner, each member of the household withdraws into their own bunk; the beds are arranged one next to the other to exploit all the space available; *"rent is expensive, so the more you are the better"*. The feelings of discouragement and mistrust are replaced by a melancholy that takes shape in the memories of these men, who in the silence of the night can carve out a moment of intimacy.

The narrator's voice interprets the thoughts and dreams of these fathers, sons and brothers who, through an imaginary voyage, seek relief and comfort in their own private lives. A faded and worn photograph of the family, a handkerchief soaked in the perfume of the beloved, described as treasures, stimulate the passions of the protagonists and help them relive happy moments.



Il prezzo del miracolo, PCI, (1963)

On the other hand, *L'altra faccia del miracolo* (1963) describes the anguish and problems that the mothers, wives and sisters of the emigrants are called to face in complete solitude. Like the DC, the PCI entrusts its messages to the private time of the families, but with substantial differences: PCI chooses to represent an extended family institution and describes it as a lively and supportive community. The PCI seems to want to bring attention back to the dynamics and practices that distinguished its political and associative activity, through a symbolic construction of the private family. Family union, the spirit of solidarity and the openness of the family to social subjects introduces the model of the 'great communist family', and at the same time presents a party ready to support the development and growth of the family not only in relation to material benefits. In essence, the films of the PCI, use the family to denounce a state and a mass society that seek to condition and control the development of a free and plural society, and at the same time makes a 'public use' of family privacy to propagandize a system of values alternative to the "capitalist".



*L'altra faccia del miracolo, PCI, (1963)*

The film production of the PCI offers some suggestions that allow you to introduce other issues and variables. Emblematic are the interviews given by the wives of the emigrants of the *Altra faccia del miracolo* (1963) to a propagandist of the PCI. Beyond the clear condemnation of the state institution that contributed to family disintegration, favouring the development of certain social strata and geographical areas, the short film, perhaps without intention, shows the resentment that the wives of the emigrants have towards their companions, who left in search of fortune. Numerous interviews show how women condemn their husbands for leaving them alone. The word "abandonment" recurs many times, highlighting the malaise of the protagonists. The distance and the lack of communication in the couple means that the feeling of love is followed by the feeling of resentment; women, obliged every day to the usual routine, on the one hand abandon themselves to memories, to nostalgia, and on the other hand seem to feel envy for their companions who have left for new experiences.



*L'altra faccia del miracolo, PCI, (1963)*



*L'altra faccia del miracolo, PCI, (1963)*

Rosalia, for example, alone for six years now, at first praises her husband who every month “sends the money”, but at the end of the interview emphasizes that it was time for him “to return home or the children will not have a father and I have a husband”.



*L'altra faccia del miracolo, PCI, (1963)*

The woman also condemns the public institution and the society “*that gives, to those who already have*”. Once again, the reasons for friction in the couple are attributable to the relationship between external causes and internal motivations.

Rosalia claims her rights as a wife and, especially, as a woman; she does not hesitate to admit her frustrations and, above all, she does not hide the fact that her marriage is in crisis. Rosalia’s attitude highlights how a progressive socio-cultural transformation affects the mentality of the women of the time; her portrait offers a strong and autonomous female image. Starting from her conjugal bond, she seems ready to question her role in the family and in society. However, Rosalia was educated to be an obedient wife and a shrewd mother, so beyond her outlet in front of the camera she will continue to absolve and believe in what they taught her to interpret. On the other hand, reviewing the production of the PCI of the fifties, you notice that this type of representation of the female universe is quite rare, while the traditional conventions of the gender prevail (S. Bellassai, 2000° et 2000b, pp.265-301).

### **Conclusion**

Reality against fiction, passions against interests, rights against duties, men against women, children against fathers: the links delineated as we have seen are not linear at all, but instead reveal a latent or open conflict. The clash between affections and feelings of everyday life, society and institutions evokes the confrontation between the public and private spheres, which is a precious sign of the deep tension that pervades Italy in the fifties. The family remains the “*primary space for the formation of social, gender and generational identities*”(E.Asquer et al., 2010, p.9). It is a privileged place of attention and elaboration both for the Church and for political cultures.

The public use of the family emerges with singular immediacy in all the film



productions examined. In image propaganda, the representation of the everyday life of families proves to be a flexible tool for conveying messages and sedimenting ways of thinking. The individual destinies of men and women seem to be fulfilled only within the family institution.

On the other hand, there is a widespread belief that the very relationship between the public and private spheres of the family concerns the content and quality of democracy itself. The processes of transformation of the family institute are now being brought to the attention of the studies, precisely because it is possible to trace in them the origin of some of the most important issues that make democracy so fragile and uncertain the secular nature of state institutions today (A. Giovagnoli, 2007, 81-103).

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different types of families, the PCI and the State can offer an interpretative paradigm to decipher the languages of the products of mass communication. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the link between strong and weak families is difficult to apply to clarify the relationship between the family, the State, parties and civil society. As Paul Ginsborg points out, there is not necessarily a link between "extended family structures and the network of associations".

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